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WASHINGTON, DC - U.S. Congressman Mike Pence made the following statement from the floor of the U.S. House of Representatives in opposition to hate crimes provisions that were inserted into the Conference Report for H.R. 2647, the National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2010:

"Throughout my nearly nine years in Congress, I have been downrange with our troops every year in Afghanistan and Iraq. I have also supported every defense authorization bill that has come before this body. And so I rise with a heavy heart today to say that I will break that personal tradition in opposing this bill.

"No one doubts that the National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2010 is an important piece of legislation. Its essential elements will provide for our troops the critical resources they need to accomplish their mission. However, the Majority in this Congress has cynically included hate crimes provisions in this legislation that threaten the very freedoms of speech and religion that draw our soldiers into the uniform of this nation.

"Men and women throughout our history have put on the uniform for a variety of reasons. Some out of a sense of patriotism. Some out of a sense of love for their families. Love for their country. A sense of duty. But in every single case, I would offer that from the American Revolution forward, every American who has put on the uniform of this country has done so to defend freedom. Therefore, the very idea that we would erode the freedoms for which our soldiers wear the uniform in a bill that is designed to provide resources those soldiers need to get the job done and come home safe, is unconscionable.

"It is simply inappropriate to use a defense bill as a vehicle for divisive, liberal social policies, wholly unrelated to our country's national security. Democrats in the Majority, with the assent of this administration, are piling liberal social priorities onto the backs of our soldiers. This is disturbing, I suspect, to millions of Americans and counterproductive to the legislative process.

"But on to the substance of hate crimes. I find myself in strong agreement this day with Thomas Jefferson who said 'legislative powers of government reach actions only, and not opinions.' And he actually connected that very principle with the foundation and rationale for the First Amendment.

"Hate crimes provisions in this legislation, as before, are antithetical to those First Amendment traditions and unnecessary. Violent attacks on people are already illegal regardless of the motive behind them, and there is no evidence that the underlying violent crimes at issue here are not being fully and aggressively prosecuted under current law. Therefore, in a practical sense, hate crimes laws serve no practical purpose and instead serve to penalize people for their thoughts, beliefs and attitudes, and send us down that very slippery slope Thomas Jefferson warned against.

"Some of these thoughts, beliefs and attitudes, such as racism and sexism, and bias against people because of their sexual preferences, I find abhorrent. I disdain discrimination. I disdain bigotry. But these hate crimes provisions, including those that will be added to federal law today, are broad enough to encompass legitimate beliefs, and protecting the rights of freedom of speech and religion must be first and foremost and paramount on the floor of this chamber.

"To put it quite simply, adding hate crimes provisions in this defense bill put us on a slippery slope of deeming particular groups more important than others under our system of justice. Singling out particular groups of victims erodes our long-standing legal principles of equal protection under the law.

"The First Amendment to the Constitution provides that 'Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion or prohibiting the free exercise thereof.' America was founded on the notion that the government should not interfere with the religious practices or expressions of our people. But there is a real possibility that the provisions in this defense bill, having to do with hate crimes and sexual preferences, could have that effect. These provisions, as written, could have a chilling effect against religious leaders in this country.

"As has been previously stated by Judge Carter of Texas, under Section 2 of Title 18 of the U.S. Code today, an individual may be held criminally liable who 'aids, abets, counsels, commands, induces or procures' in the commission of a federal crime.

Therefore, to put a fine point on it, any pastor, preacher, priest, rabbi, or imam, who may give a sermon out of their moral traditions about sexual practices, could presumably under this legislation be found to have aided, abetted or induced in the commission of a federal crime.

"This will have a chilling effect on religious expression, from the pulpits, in our temples, in our mosques and in our churches. And it must be undone.

"So let me say as I close, the provisions added to this legislation threaten religious freedom by criminalizing thought. It is simply wrong to further criminalize thought and chill religious expression of Americans. But let me also say, as I said before, a defense authorization bill ought to be about the national defense. Here we have, in this Majority, in an effort to move liberal social policies at home, a willingness to pile unrelated liberal priorities on the backs of an effort to advance our national security. That is unconscionable.

"Let us remember what our soldiers are fighting for. Let us remember why they put on the uniform. They wear the uniform to defend freedom. So let's take a stand for freedom today. And let us take a stand for a legislative process that has genuine integrity to purpose. I urge my colleagues to vote against the rule, and I sadly urge my colleagues to vote against the defense authorization bill."